

Promoting Resilience and Recovery in Newtown's Schools

Connecticut's Mental Health Response
to the Sandy Hook Tragedy

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New Hampshire DBHRT Conference

Introduction

- Discuss
 - State's mental health role in a mass casualty event
 - Effects of mass casualty event on schools
 - Unique role for disaster responders in schools
 - Common intervention strategies
 - Lessons learned

Sandy Hook Tragedy

- 26 children and staff died
- 2 staff and 12 children survived
- Sandy Hook had about 600 students
- K through 4
- 90 staff
- 6 other schools in district with close ties

Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services Role

- Designated by Governor as lead for behavioral health
- Coordinated closely with Department of Children and Families
- Provided a range of administrative and direct service roles
- Assisted in grant preparation

Mental Health Assets

- DBHRN – Disaster Behavioral Health Response Network
 - 5 regional teams
 - Comprised of DMHAS, DCF and PNP MH staff
 - Formed after 9-11 to enhance state capacity
 - Short-term response
 - Core training include ICS and PFA, exercises,
- DMHAS and DCF state employees
- DMHAS and DCF PNP mobile crisis staff
- HHS strike teams

Scope of the Response

- 220 individuals for overall response
- Utilized DMHAS, DCF, HHS, and private providers
- Duration of almost 3 months with decreasing intensity
- Encompassed 7 schools

Community Intervention Points

- Family Notifications
- Community center
- Schools and Board of Education
- Family assistance center
- Local vigils and memorials
- Child care providers
- Local providers

Unique Aspects of Newtown's Response

- Scope of the tragedy and its victims
- “Helpers” were profoundly impacted
- Connectedness across schools and community
- Duration of the response and need to blend teams
- Proximity of tragedy to school vacation
- No federal disaster declaration
- Limited MH resource capacity in town
- Loss of school leadership

Key Assumptions

- All disasters share commonalities
- Recovery could be promoted through the schools
- School and community had many strengths
- Exposure levels vary considerably
- Children's reactions will be shaped by adults
- Reactions need to be evaluated over time
- Shootings worsened pre-existing problems

Recovery in Schools

- Recovery promoted by:
 - Routines and structure
 - Peers
 - Social supports
 - Opportunities for mastery

Goals for School Response

- Support rapid return to academic mission
- Assist community to deal with grief and trauma
- Conduct triage and link to services
- Provide mapping of most affected in school
- Assist school to plan for and transition to long-term recovery program

“People Heal”

Fran Norris research???

Factors that Promote Resiliency

- Restore sense of safety
- Personal competency and control
- Return to routines
- Restoring sense of hope
- Connection to social supports

Initial Activities

- Team activation
- Blending teams
- Just-in-time training
- SHS teacher assembly
- District – wide teacher assembly
- Meetings w/school leadership
- Designation of counseling space

Common Interventions

- Brief supportive counseling
- Parent and staff education
- In-class activities – art, relaxation, PFA
- Case coordination and linkage
- Consultation

Universal Themes

- Am I safe here?
- Is my child traumatized for life?
- How can I face my friend who lost a child?
- How do I talk to my child or students about this?
- Why aren't you providing treatment to all students and staff?
- What can I do to support my child?

Loss

- Loss of lives and friends
- Loss of sense of safety
- Loss of school
- Loss of routines

Promoting Safety

- Security and police presence
- Tours and open house
- ID's or badges for special helpers
- Parent access to school
- Minimizing noise and disruptions
- Predictability and routines

Staff Support

- Teacher meetings to discuss fears
- Support room
- Floating subs
- Script for first day of school
- Daily check-ins
- Self-care activities
- “Recovery tidbits”
- Staff education

Child Support

- Support room
- “Hug room”
- Therapy dogs
- Brief supportive interventions
- In-class activities –art, relaxation, coping

Parent Support

- Parent “space”
- Educational materials
- Small and large group psychoeducation
- Support groups
- Regular parent communications

Psychological Effects

Challenges in Coordinating a Response

- Overwhelming demand on town and school
- Severely impacted “helpers”
- Coordination of resources
- Media crush
- Access to most vulnerable
- Planning
- Recordkeeping

Models for School Recovery Programs

- District-wide
- Dependent on School and Community Resources
 - School personnel
 - Community provider
 - Blended model

Components of a Long-Term Recovery Program

- Designated staff support for children, parents, and staff
- Screening and surveillance over time
- Parent and staff education
- Trauma-focused interventions like TF-CBT or CBITS
- Counseling
- Case coordination
- Linkage to other schools

Hindsight is 20 20

Potential Training Considerations

- Death notifications and development of specialized team
- PFA and PFA for schools
- Trauma screening and brief intervention
- Manualized trauma programs like CBITS or TF-CBT
- School organization and command structure

Personal Reflections

- Sacred Privilege
- Good wins over evil

“We Must Do Better”

- Early identification and linkage to services
- Community awareness re mental health
- Prevention programs
- Mental health tools for school personnel like PFA, CBITS

Resilience and Hope

“A tremendously significant sign of resilience and recovery and healing is also evident in the absence of silence. I hope that you have noticed the wonderful sound of bus-time laughter and locker door slamming that has naturally been reawakening these past couple of weeks”. Winter is not over and snow will likely fall again this year, but the thawing has definitely begun. The experience of pain, grief, anger, loss....is also not over, nor is there a “right” or “normal” period of time. Difficult days will be interspersed by a “better” day (or hour) and back-and-forth experiences are to be expected. Hope...a glimmer of something better.

Resources for Dealing with Violence and Trauma

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network
 - www.nctsnet.org
- National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
 - www.ncptsd.va.gov.
- National Center for Children Exposed to Violence
 - www.nccev.org
- SAMHSA Disaster Technical Assistance Center
 - <http://www.samhsa.gov/dtac/>
- Center for Disease Control
 - <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/youthviolence/>

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